DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 362 074 FL 800 314

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TITLE Language and Literacy Teachers: Diverse Backgrounds, Common Concerns.
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 5p.; Paper presented at a Conference on Responsibilities for Literacy (September 15, 1990).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; *Individual Differences; *Language Teachers; *Literacy Education; *Professional Development; *Professional Recognition; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Characteristics

ABSTRACT

Language and literacy teachers in adult education vary widely in personal background, educational training, professional experience, interest in language and literacy, and enthusiasm for teaching. Teaching context and focus may differ greatly. Because of funding realities, teachers often need to find a balance between their own views of responsible and appropriate literacy education and the requirements and expectations of the funding source and other stakeholders. Language and literacy teachers may define their goals differently, or vary in their instructional approach. Despite this diversity, most language and literacy teachers share the feeling that they receive inadequate support and compensation for their efforts and are not given sufficient opportunities for professional development. As a starting point, these teachers want to be: (1) treated with respect and dignity; (2) provided with opportunities to learn and grow at their own pace and meet their individual professional goals; and (3) regarded as experts capable of understanding and interpreting the relationship between classroom teaching and student learning. Just as learners need different kinds of input at various stages of language and literacy development, teachers also need differentiated support depending on where they are as teachers and individuals. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education) (MSE)

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12/11/90

ED 362 074

Language and Literacy Teachers: Diverse Backgrounds, Common Concerns

Language and literacy teachers in adult education are a highly diverse group. They differ widely in respect to personal background, educational training, professional experience, interest in language and literacy and enthusiasm for teaching. They may teach in community colleges, public schools, at the work site, in union halls, or in community centers, or they may tutor in libraries, prisons, churches and synagogues or in housing projects. Their focus in teaching language and literacy may vary along with the goals of their students: while some teach learners who want to become more proficient in English in order to gain greater independence, access services, and take advantage of better job opportunities, others interact with students who want to learn to read and write in their native language so that they can maintain the literacy traditions of their own culture or read with their children. The adults they teach may be native-born or immigrants, refugees, newly legalized adults, or those without papers.

Practitioners are keenly aware that their professional lives are linked to the vicissitudes of funding since monies for programs come from a variety of sources including the federal government (for workplace, family literacy, amnesty and refugee programs), private foundations, state departments of education, or a combination of federal and state funds. As a result of funding realities, teachers often need to find a balance between their own views of responsible and appropriate literacy education and the requirements and expectation of the funding source and other stakeholders. For example, teachers who support a Freirean approach may find themselves teaching in a program that requires that certain prescribed and predetermined competencies must be taught. Similarly, teachers who advocate a process approach to literacy assessment and evaluation, nevertheless may need to prepare students for standardized exit tests. As the amnesty program has shown, committed teachers often end up advocating for change in the curriculum and helping their programs redefine requirements in such a way that classroom teaching can continue to be educationally sound and socially responsible.

Language and literacy teachers may define their professional goals in different ways: they may regard themselves foremost as academic instructors of language and literacy, interpreting the teacher-student relationship as an association between a professional and a client, or they may see themselves as "co-learners" and "facilitators" whose main purpose is to support students' efforts to gain greater control over the circumstances of their lives. In spite of discussions that emphasize an ideological rift between linguistic/academic perspectives and community orientations, most teachers seek to emphasize both, professionalism in teaching and humanistic concern for their students.

Teachers also differ in their orientation towards language teaching and learning: Some may put a strong emphasis on directed teaching, focusing on clearly outlined objectives

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of what is to be taught by the instructor and mastered by the students. Others take a more developmental approach: By working with their students to devise opportunities for reading, writing, and face to face communication, they allow learning to emerge naturally out of various literacy events. As a group, language and literacy teachers support teaching that is learner-centered, striving to meet the needs of the students and enabling them to meet their goals. However, in many programs, teachers go one step further - implementing a participatory approach in which learners are actively involved in making decisions about how they want to be evaluated, what they want to learn, and how the program can best meet their varied needs.

In spite of their diversity in background and perspective, most language and literacy practitioners share the feeling that they receive inadequate support and compensation for their efforts and are not provided with sufficient opportunities for professional development. Out of discussions with teachers about their professional circumstances (along with first hand-experience as an ESL "instructor"), there emerges **a clear sense that the field needs to consider what Auerbach (1990) calls a "Practitioners' Bill of Rights", or an outline (if not a manifesto) of what teachers can rightfully expect from their profession.** What rights do teachers think they have? Specifics may depend on the type of program and the individual teaching context, but a number of common issues deserve to be highlighted:

As a starting point, language and literacy teachers want the following:

* to be treated with respect and dignity, have their contributions recognized and their efforts rewarded. In most cases, this translates into being treated as professionals worthy of teaching jobs that pay a decent wage, **offer benefits**, provide release time for curriculum development and offer opportunities for advancement. This is true of full time teachers as well as those working part time; all deserve to be included in the professional dialogue about teaching and learning so that their voices can be heard. To be successful, language and literacy teachers require time, space, and funds to work together and share ideas. They need access to continuing education opportunities that help them to overcome the isolation of the classroom and allow them to influence the field and shape the profession.

* to be given opportunities to learn and grow at their own pace and meet their individual professional goals. While all teachers need opportunities to update their knowledge base and increase their teaching repertoire, they may require such support at different times and to varying degrees. At times, teachers may want to concentrate on updating their knowledge base and increasing their instructional repertoire. At other times, they may need opportunities to reflect on their teaching and examine their educational philosophy. (In discussing these differences, Nunan (1989) talks about "effective" versus "reflective" teaching, while Rogers, (1990) makes the distinction between "micro"-and "macro-teaching".) Again, most teachers want both: access to information about effective teaching strategies and opportunities to engage collectively in

thoughtful deliberation about teaching. All deserve a forum that allows them to articulate and express their professional concerns.

* to be regarded as "experts" capable of understanding and interpreting the relationship between classroom teaching and student learning. To explore that connections, many teachers are now becoming involved in "action research", documenting the thoughts that go into their teaching, the strategies they use to interact with their students, the attitudes that surface during the lessons and the outcomes that result from particular interactions. These teachers want access to theories and discussions that help them examine how their students manage to learn in a particular classroom context and how they can help shape a learner's language and literacy development. They want to know how to make links between their own thoughts about teaching and the theories developed by linguists and university-based researchers. There is an increasing awareness that teachers are more than just "users" of research; we have come to recognize that practitioners can make valuable contributions to action-based research and through an examination of classroom issues move the field towards a greater understanding of the literacy education of adults.

Just as learners require different kinds of input at various stages of language and literacy development, so do teachers need differentiated support depending on where they are as teachers and who they are as individuals. There is a great deal of talk these days about the need to empower students, foster their self-esteem, validate their experiences, and focus on their strengths instead of their weaknesses. We cannot be successful in this endeavor if we don't support the same principles when it comes to the professional development of practitioners.

I want to thank Suzanne Liebman for her concern that diversity in teaching not be represented as a dichotomy between full time versus part time teachers or between the authoritarian linguist and the humane social worker. I welcome comments from others on the ideas outlined in this piece.

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Further Reading

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